

John Benjamin Smith's account, in F. A. Bruton, *Three Accounts of Peterloo by Eyewitnesses* (Manchester, 1921), 58-74

. . . The people, disappointed in their expectations that prosperity and plenty would follow the return of peace, and having no faith in a legislature which as soon as the war terminated inflicted upon them a Corn Law to deprive them of cheap corn, demanded a better representation in Parliament. Stimulated by the writings of Cobbett, associations were formed in all the manufacturing districts to obtain a reform in Parliament. Lancashire took the lead in this movement. Clubs were established in 1816 in all the manufacturing towns and villages. At the small town of Middleton, near Manchester, a Club was formed in which Bamford, the weaver-poet, took a leading part. They were joined by many honest and intelligent men from all parts of the district, among whom was John Knight, a small manufacturer. A meeting of delegates was held on the first of January, 1817, at which it was decided that the reforms required could only be accomplished by the establishment of annual parliaments and universal suffrage.

The establishment of these clubs alarmed the Government, who saw in them nothing but an intention to overturn the institutions of the country, and to revive in this country the enormities of the French Revolution. Spies and Informers were employed by the Government, and John Knight and thirty-seven others who had legally assembled to discuss the reforms which they deemed necessary to obtain a repeal of the Corn Laws and good government, were arrested on the information of spies, and sent for trial to Lancaster, but on their trial before Mr. Baron Wood, were all found not guilty by the Jury.

The Sidmouth Government suspended the Habeas Corpus Act so that they could arrest and imprison any person as long as they pleased. The Tories, following the example of the Radicals, established Associations for the protection of the Constitution.

In January, 1818, however, it was announced that the Act for the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act would be repealed. No sooner were the people relieved from the danger of being sent to prison for being present at a meeting to petition Parliament for reform, as great numbers had been in Lancashire imprisoned from March, 1817 until January, 1818, and then discharged without being informed what charges were made against them—than the Reform Associations were revived. A fresh campaign was rigorously commenced early in 1819.

Henry Hunt (commonly called Orator Hunt) had come forward as the champion of the people's rights. On the 25th of January, he made a public entry into Manchester from Stockport, accompanied by large crowds with flags and banners. The meeting was enthusiastic but very peaceable. Meetings were held in all the surrounding towns and villages to appoint district delegates to make arrangements for a great meeting to be held in Manchester. This memorable meeting was held on the 16th of August, 1819, on a large vacant plot of land called St. Peter's field, adjoining St. Peter's Street, and in sight of St. Peter's Church. The actors in the bloody tragedy of that day were called "The Heroes of Peterloo," in contrast with the brave heroes of Waterloo.

This meeting was called to petition Parliament for a Reform of Parliament and the Repeal of the Corn Laws, and it is a curious coincidence that on the very spot where the largest public meeting was ever held to petition Parliament for the Repeal of the Corn Laws, in the dispersion of which by military force six hundred persons were killed and wounded there now stands the Free Trade Hall, erected twenty years afterwards on Peterloo, for the peaceful and noble object of obtaining bread for the people by the repeal of the wicked laws by which it was prohibited.

I had no intention of going to this meeting, but my Aunt called at the Counting House and asked me to accompany her to Mrs. Orton's, Mount Street, St. Peter's field, to see the great meeting — a house overlooking the whole space, and next but one to where the Magistrates were assembled. We reached there about half-past eleven o'clock, and on our way saw large bodies of men and women with bands playing and flags and banners bearing devices : "No Corn Laws," "Reform," etc. There were crowds of people in all directions, full of good humour, laughing and shouting and making fun. I always wore a white hat in summer, and I found that Mr. Hunt also wore a white hat, and it became the symbol of radicalism, and may have been the cause of the politeness shown to us by the crowd.

It seemed to be a gala day with the country people who were mostly dressed in their best and brought with them their wives, and when I saw boys and girls taking their father's hand in the procession, I observed to my Aunt: "These are the guarantees of their peaceable intentions— we need have no fears," and so we passed on to Mrs. Orton's. When we arrived there we saw great

crowds which were constantly increased by the arrival of successive country processions until it was estimated that the meeting amounted to 60,000 people. There was a double row of constables formed from Mr. Buxton's (where the magistrates had taken their station) to the hustings.

My Father joined us soon after our arrival at Mrs. Orton's.

At length Hunt made his appearance in an open barouche drawn by two horses, and a woman dressed in white sitting on the box. On their reaching the hustings which were prepared for the orator, he was received with enthusiastic applause ; the waving of hats and flags ; the blowing of trumpets; and the playing of music. Hunt stepped on to the hustings, and was again cheered by the vast assemblage. He began to address them, and I could distinctly see his motions through the glass I held in my hand, and I could hear his voice, but could not understand what he said. He paused, and the people cheered him.

About this time there was an alarm among the women and children near the place where I stood, and I could also see a part of the crowd in motion towards the Deansgate side, but I thought it a false alarm, as many returned again and joined in the huzzas of the crowd. A second alarm arose, and I heard the sound of a horn, and immediately the Manchester Yeomanry appeared, coming from Peter Street, headed by Hugh Birley, the same man who, in 1815, as Boroughreeve of Manchester, presided at the public meeting assembled to petition Parliament for the Repeal of the Corn Laws. They galloped up to the house where the Magistrates were assembled, halted, and drew up in line. After some hesitation, from what cause I do not know, I heard the order to form three deep, and then the order to march. The Trumpeter led the way and galloped towards the hustings, followed by the yeomanry.

Whilst this was passing, my attention was called to another movement coming from the opposite side of the meeting. A troop of soldiers, the 15th Hussars, turned round the corner of the house where we stood and galloped forwards towards the crowd. They were succeeded by the Cheshire Yeomanry, and lastly by two pieces of artillery. On the arrival of the soldiers, the special constables, the magistrates, and the soldiers set up loud shouts. This was responded to by the crowd with waving of hats. After this the soldiers galloped amongst the people

creating frightful alarm and disorder. The people ran helter-skelter in every direction.

It was a hot, dusty day; clouds of dust arose which obscured the view. When it had subsided a startling scene was presented. Numbers of men, women, and children were lying on the ground who had been knocked down and run over by the soldiers. I noticed one woman lying face downwards, apparently lifeless. A man went up to her and lifted one of her legs ; it fell as if she were lifeless ; another man lifted both her legs and let them fall. I saw her some time after carried off by the legs and arms as if she were dead.

My attention was then directed to a number of constables bringing from the hustings the famous Hunt wearing a white hat, and with him another man, also wearing a white hat, who was said to be Johnson. The prisoners were treated in a scandalous manner ; many of the constables hissed and beat them as they passed. When they reached the Magistrates' house he was surrounded by constables, some pulling him by the collar, others by the coat. A dastardly attack was made upon him by General Clay, who with a large stick struck him over the head with both hands as he was ascending the steps to the Magistrates' house. The blow knocked in his hat and packed it over his face. He then turned round as if ashamed of himself and became a quiet spectator. The ground by this time was cleared, and nothing was to be seen but soldiers and constables.

The Rev. Mr. Hay (the Chairman to the Magistrates) then stood on the steps of Mr. Buxton's house and addressed the constables. I could not hear what he said, but he was cheered when he concluded. He then returned into the house, but came out again soon afterwards with Mr. Marriott, the Magistrate, and Hunt in the custody of Nadin, Chief Constable, and with Johnson in the custody of another constable. When Hunt made his appearance, he was assailed with groans and hisses by the soldiers and constables. Hunt took off his hat and bowed to them, which appeared to calm them while they marched towards Deansgate on their way to the New Bailey prison, escorted by the cavalry. On quitting the windows from whence we had witnessed so many painful scenes, we descended and found two special constables who had been brought into the house. One presented a shocking sight— the face was all over blood from a sword-cut on his head, and his shoulder was put out. The other was bloody from being rode over and kicked on the back of his head.

When the particulars of this bloody tragedy became known, strong feelings of indignation were expressed all over the country. The Manchester magistrates, alarmed at the tone of public opinion in London, had a meeting hastily convened on the 19th of August at the Police Office, which was adjourned to the Star Inn, where resolutions were passed thanking the magistrates and the soldiers. I happened by accident to be present at the meeting. A young man with whom I was acquainted, a clerk in the office of the Clerk to the Magistrates, happening to meet me in the street on his way to the meeting, took me by the arm and said : "Come with me." I asked where he was going, and when I learned, declined to go. He replied: " Nonsense, you will hear what is going on," and so I somewhat reluctantly went with him to the Star Inn. On our arrival we found the room pretty full and I took a seat. The Chairman, Mr. Francis Phillips, rose and said : "If there be any persons present who do not approve of the objects of this meeting they are requested to withdraw." I thought he looked at me, and felt a little uncomfortable. He sat down again and rose to repeat his request. I thought that as I should know better what the object of the meeting was after I had heard it explained, I would sit still, and so I remained to the end. After the meeting I told some of my Reform friends how I came to be present at the meeting, and they wished me to write out an account of the proceedings. I did so, and with a few alterations and the omission of names it was inserted in Cowdroy's Gazette. This statement created great alarm among those who got up the meeting to thank the magistrates, and they denounced it as a false statement, but another letter to Cowdroy's Gazette affirmed the truth of the account of the meeting to thank the magistrates, and threatened to make public the names of the speakers if its correctness was again called in question.

The dispersion of a legally convened meeting by military force aroused a general indignation, and the smuggled passing of thanks to the magistrates so dishonestly sent forth occasioned an expression of public feeling and opinion such as had never been manifested in Manchester before. A "Declaration and Protest" against the Star Inn resolutions was immediately issued, stating that "We are fully satisfied by personal observation on undoubted information that the meeting was perfectly peaceable; that no seditious or intemperate harangues were made there; that the Riot Act, if read at all, was read privately, or without the knowledge of a great body of the meeting, and we feel it our bounden duty to protest against and to express our utter

disapprobation of the unexpected and unnecessary violence by which the assembly was dispersed.

"We further declare that the meeting convened at the Police Office on the 19th of August for the purpose of thanking the magistrates, municipal officers, soldiers, etc., was strictly and exclusively private, and in order that the privacy might be more completely ensured was adjourned to the Star Inn. It is a matter of notoriety that no expression of dissent from the main object of the meeting was there permitted. We therefore deny that it had any claim to the title of a "numerous and highly respectable meeting of the inhabitants of Manchester and Salford and their neighbourhood."

In the course of three or four days this protest received 4,800 signatures.

By way of counteracting this energetic protest, on the 27th of August Lord Sidmouth communicated to the Manchester Magistrates and to Major Trafford and the military serving under him the thanks of the Prince Regent "for their prompt, decisive, and efficient measures for preservation of the public peace on August the 16th."

Meanwhile hundreds of persons wounded on that fatal day were enduring dreadful suffering. They were disabled from work ; not daring to apply for parish relief ; not even daring to apply for surgical aid, lest, in the arbitrary spirit of the time, their acknowledgment that they had received their wounds on St. Peter's field might send them to prison— perhaps to the scaffold.

A committee was formed for the purpose of making a rigid enquiry into the cases of those who had been killed and wounded; and subscriptions were raised for their relief. After an enquiry of many successive weeks the committee published the cases of eleven killed and five hundred and sixty wounded, of whom about a hundred and twenty were females.

The Rev. W. R. Hay, Chairman of the Bench of Magistrates, was rewarded by being presented to the living of Rochdale, worth £2,000 a year.

Hunt and his companions were committed to Lancaster, and subsequently tried at York, where he was found guilty and sentenced to be imprisoned for two years and a half, and

Johnson, Healey, and Bamford to one year's imprisonment.

The bloody proceedings at Peterloo startled the whole nation. Meetings were held everywhere, denouncing them in the strongest terms. Sir Francis Burdett addressed a letter to the Electors of Westminster, expressing his "Shame, grief, and Indignation" at the proceedings, and was prosecuted by the Attorney-General for Libel and was fined £2,000 and imprisoned for three months. Lord Fitzwilham, for attending a public meeting to express disapprobation at the means by which the meeting at Peterloo was dispersed, was dismissed from his office as Lord Lieutenant of Yorkshire.

These proceedings produced a deep impression on the minds of thoughtful men, who began to think we were on the brink of despotism, and that the time had arrived when the country should be no longer ruled by Landowners and Boroughmongers, but by representatives chosen by the people. . . .